

VZCZCXRO2519

PP RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDBU RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA
RUEHLN RUEHLZ RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHRA #0812/01 3030513
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 300513Z OCT 07
FM AMEMBASSY RIGA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4483
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 RIGA 000812

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [LG](#)

SUBJECT: Old Believers in Latvia

¶1. Summary: Latvia is well-known for its large Russian community, mainly the large number of non-citizens and claims that they are discriminated against, especially on language. However, it would be a big mistake to perceive Russians in Latvia as a homogenous religious community. While the majority are orthodox, significant numbers are Catholic, evangelical, or Old Believers. Old Believers are a relatively small community with strong historic and cultural roots in Latvia. Almost all Old Believers are Latvian citizens. However, they make few political claims. The state recognizes Old Belief as one of Latvia's seven traditional religions and provides some support for preserving and maintaining their cultural and historical heritage. End summary.

¶2. Most international and even local actors are used to making very general conclusions about Russians in Latvia; they are non-citizens, they do not know Latvian, etc. However, a closer examination of Russians in Latvia - their history, sociological profile, and attitudes - suggests caution in using convenient generalizations. It is true that the majority of Russians arrived to Latvia during the Soviet period, however, there are groups within the Russian community that have deep roots in Latvian society. Russians were the biggest minority already in inter-war (1918 - 1940) Latvia, though at that time they constituted about nine percent of population, vice today's nearly thirty percent. Diversity also exists in their religious affiliation and observance: about 70 percent indentify as Orthodox, 15 percent - Old Believer, and seven percent - Catholic. There is also a sizable number in the evangelical movement.

¶3. What is Old Belief

Old Believers have a unique faith, culture and history. Some representatives of Latvia's Old Believers even claim that the community (about 60,000 - 80,000) are a distinct ethnic-religious group and should not be treated the same way as "other Russians." The term 'Old Belief' refers to the churches and religious communities that do not recognize the reforms launched in the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century by Patriarch Nikon. From the established Russian Orthodox Church it differs not so much in its doctrine as in its rites and observances. The Old Believers also have peculiar ecclesiastical structures of their own as well as their own interpretation of certain elements of the Holy Writ and the Tradition. The Old Believers traditionally cross themselves with two fingers, and they recognized only pre-reform icons, liturgical books and observances, and the eight-armed cross. The majority of Old Believers have no regular clergy (and no three-level hierarchy as the Orthodox Church has), and their liturgies and religious observances are conducted by 'spiritual fathers' elected among the parishioners themselves. The early Old Believers were characterized by their hostility to all things secular, especially the State and a society ruled, as they thought, by the Antichrist, their refusal to entertain any contacts with 'worldly people' (with whom they would not eat, drink or pray together), their anxious expectancy of the 'world's end', their rigid asceticism, their abidance by old traditions, rites and lifestyles, etc. Estimates place the total number of Old Believers remaining in the world today at from 1 to 10 million, some living in extremely isolated communities in places to which they fled centuries ago to avoid persecution.

¶4. History of Old Believers in Latvia

The first records of Old Believers settlements in Latvia can be traced back to the 17th century, when hundreds of Old Believers from neighboring areas of Tsarist Russia settled in the eastern part of Latvia seeking refuge from persecution as a result of their unwillingness to accept reforms in the Orthodox Church. Also nowadays the biggest Old Believers communities are to be found in the eastern part of Latvia (Latgale), as well as in the capital Riga. In Latgale, there are villages where the number of Old Believers reaches 80 - 90 percent of the population, for instance, Silmalas in Rezekne's district. Similarly to other religions, there are a number of splinter groups within Old Belief. In Latvia the dominant majority are Pomorsky Old Believers (main distinction: no priesthood), however, some attempts to establish other groups have been made.

15. Today's situation in the community.

Today the older generation of Latvia's Old Believers continues to observe their religious rites and traditions. For a broader public, they are mainly known for their attempts to maintain their unique religious heritage and low political profile. In private conversations, they claim to be a distinctive group within Latvia's Russian community since, in contrast to Russians who came to Latvia in the Soviet period, they have Latvian citizenship. A few ethnic Russian politicians and MPs claim to be Old Believers, however, according to leader of one of Old Believers' communities "that has not resulted in any profit" for the community.

16. Official stance. The official government policy towards Old Believers in general could be characterized as supportive or neutral. The leader of Jekabpils' Old Believers' community claimed that Latvia is among a very few places where Old Believers may practice their religion freely. Their attempts to preserve Old Believers historical heritage (churches, graveyards) are very often funded by government and individual municipalities. Besides, Old Belief, along with seven other religions designated by law as

RIGA 00000812 002 OF 002

"traditional", has been given particular rights by Latvian law. Despite the overall positive or neutral attitude towards Old Belief, Latvian legislation has legal norms which are discriminatory against Old Believers: since Old Believers' faith does not allow taking oath, it would not be possible for a fully-observant Old Believer to take positions in government which require taking oath. However, there is no information on real cases and the representative of the Old Believers community hardly doubted such possibility, since Old Believers who observe the rites also prefer to abstain from state activities.

17. Comment: Though Old Believers are not granted specific political and social rights by the official policy, Old Believers are recognized by the Latvian state, can freely practice their religion and receive some support for the perseverance of their unique cultural heritage. Individual objections against equalizing Russians who are Old Believers with other Russians are made in private and most likely will not become official demand to recognize the Old Believers as a distinct ethnic/religious group since the community does not have strong political lobbies and is more concerned about the perseverance of its cultural and religious heritage. The future of the community is endangered not so much by official policy as lack of members of new generation who follow and observe rites and traditions of Old Belief.

SELDOWITZ